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Trapped in Economic Vulnerability? Pastoral Theological Reflections on Poverty

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Abstract: Poverty is a reality worldwide, impacting individuals, communities, and systems. However, poverty is by no means a simplistic concept and its complexity therefore needs to be highlighted as it varies from continent to continent. The Church and pastoral theology can contribute to constructively addressing poverty and the need to develop a theological understanding of poverty. In endeavoring to engage with this reality, this contribution attempts to argue that constructive dialogue creates opportunities for pastoral theology and the Church to change the conditions of the poor. It will also indicate how the Dialogical Intergenerational Pastoral Process (DIPP) as a pastoral approach to poverty, vulnerability, and vulnerance can be relevant to addressing poverty. The aim is further that this contribution will create opportunities for the poor to change pastoral theology and the Church.

Keywords: pastoral theology; church; pastoral care; vulnerability; poverty; wealth; relational ethics; dialogue; justice

1. Introduction

Gweshengwe and Hassan (2020, p. 1) describe poverty as “one of the defining challenges of the 21st Century facing the world”. The Peruvian Catholic Theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez (1992, p. 29) was utterly clear when he indicated that “Poverty means physical death due to hunger, diseases and other factors”. In his book *Poverty, by America*, Desmond (2023, p. 189) refers to it as “a dream killer, the capability destroyer, the great waster of human potential”. In his reflection on poverty in the United States of America (USA), he concludes that it is a mystery and national disgrace that America is not able to put an end to it, given that it is the richest country in the world. On the African continent, where the economic challenges are more severe than in the USA, poverty is most probably one of the root causes of many challenges people must face daily. It not only constitutes the biggest problem but also causes related challenges, changes the environment, and affects people’s behavior. Often, it is difficult to distinguish between the facts or symptoms of poverty and its origins or causes. For example, it is always a question whether illiteracy in modern societies is a manifestation or consequence of poverty, or a cause.

Poverty cannot be limited to individuals and/or families, as it is also applicable to communities and even nations. In Africa, individuals, communities, and countries can be so vulnerable due to being exposed to poverty that it is experienced as a national illness or sickness, due to its impact on humans and the ecology (Thesnaar 1993, pp. 17–52). For many citizens, being caught up in the illness of vulnerability due to poverty is a present failure to accomplish the African ideal of *ubuntu*. This concept of *ubuntu* has been romanticized and criticized in many ways by scholars as too idealistic. However, for this contribution, I want to support the definition by Kobe (2023, p. 101) who states that “*ubuntu* relates to reconciliation, forgiveness, restorative justice, and its underpinnings are to humanise and restore dignity, respect, justice in the life of the human”. Gweshengwe and Hassan (2020, p. 1) found that poverty has a characteristic language and is multidimensional, complex, individual- and context-specific, absolute, and relative and that all these



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traits of poverty influence poverty analysis. Therefore, addressing vulnerability due to poverty is complex and multi-layered, any attempt to respond or provide any form of result or well-being needs to be an interdisciplinary response. Keul (2021, p. 251) affirms this plea for poverty research, as she indicates that it needs to be interdisciplinary and adds that research on poverty should particularly include vulnerability.

Significantly, poverty and vulnerability and its impact on human rights have a religious-cultural dimension that needs to be developed. Within Africa and the South African context, religious society is still highly trusted and therefore has the potential to play a significant role in addressing poverty (Magezi 2008, pp. 268–69). In this context, the Christian Church¹ is a prominent social actor in addressing poverty and vulnerability within the local and broader community. This status is based on the Church's infrastructure and location, its ability to influence respect and cohesion, and the provision of an applicable biblical message and function. Utilizing its very nature, the Church's message, propagating life and ethics, can inevitably foster well-being among its congregants and the broader society. As part of humanity, the Church shares in the suffering of painful experiences and vulnerability. It is not the goal of the Church and its pastoral theology to take away the pain but to find ways to deal with it while we are living with it. The deeper we go into our vulnerability and painful experiences, the more we experience our common humanity with others and acquire a more profound awareness of God's love. In this regard, Leimgruber (2022, p. 6) argues in her research on abuse that it is important to look at the context in which the abuse occurred and in doing so, develop a correlated understanding of not only vulnerability but also vulnerance. In our quest to understand poverty, she helps us to distinguish between the categories of "vulnerability" and "vulnerance" in situations where human beings are suffering. She defines vulnerability "as the possible injury that may or may not happen expresses a more passive component. It refers to the vulnerability of individuals, groups, or systems (Leimgruber 2022, p. 6)". This concept defines the poor and determines whether they are victims of poverty. The concept of vulnerability is also used in processing and preventing poverty by addressing how poverty impacts individuals, groups, communities, and systems. In her discussion on the concept of vulnerability, Leimgruber (2022, p. 7) refers to the theologian Judith Butler who indicates that although vulnerability is a basic component of human existence, we are never simply vulnerable, but always vulnerable to a particular situation or a social structure we rely on. In other words, to be dependent on someone or something already implies vulnerability. People, communities, and systems caught up in the poverty trap are dependent on others or systems.

Leimgruber (2022, p. 6) defines vulnerance as "the active ability to wound. Vulnerance concerns the personal-existential (confessor, pastor), but also the institutional, systemic level (church, institution, religious community, family" (Leimgruber 2022, p. 6). In terms of the context of this contribution, vulnerance indicates that the Church can be guilty of wounding the poor in terms of its policies, attitudes, and theology and also its pastoral caregivers. Leimgruber (2022, p. 6) indicates that the two terms are not mutually exclusive polarities but must be understood in a complex and dynamic interdependent relationship, and both are situational-systemic. Leimgruber's (2022, p. 6) distinction between these concepts is significant for understanding poverty within the context of South Africa.

In an endeavor to engage with the reality of poverty, as well as the categories of vulnerability and vulnerance, this contribution attempts to indicate how the Church and pastoral theology should reflect and respond to humans trapped in poverty. It believes that pastoral theology and the Church have a purpose and duty to care for the most vulnerable in our societies and to address the injustices caused by poverty. This contribution attempts to argue that real dialogue creates opportunities for pastoral theology and the Church to change the conditions of the poor. However, more importantly, it creates opportunities for the poor to change pastoral theology and the Church. This article first attempts to indicate the complexity of poverty. Secondly, it engages theologically with poverty and lastly, it indicates how the Dialogical Intergenerational Pastoral Process (DIPP) as a pastoral approach to poverty, vulnerability, and vulnerance can be relevant to addressing poverty.

2. The Complexity of Poverty

The African pastoral scholar Waruta (2011, p. 34) stated in 2011 that poverty cannot be limited to just what we see. More recently, Gweshengwe and Hassan (2020, p. 1) have reminded us that we need to be aware of the multidimensionality and complexity of poverty, as it has financial, economic, social, environmental, and seasonal dimensions that interlink and reinforce each other. To illustrate this reality, South Africa can be viewed as a typical example, as it is indeed a country of many paradoxes. It is a country of extreme poverty where the majority live in informal housing and face poverty and vulnerability daily. Persistently high levels of crime, continued human rights violations, gender inequality, political anxiety, mistrust, and exploitation continue to exploit the vulnerability of human beings. However, it is also a country of millionaires, affluent neighborhoods, and an ever-widening gulf between the rich and the poor. Citizens are caught up in an escapable trap that emphasizes people's vulnerability, hopelessness, and powerlessness (Bowers Du Toit 2016), due to the challenges related to poverty such as loss of respect for human life, constitutional violations, outrageous unemployment levels, vulnerance, and the exploitation of those employed. Although South Africa is a democracy, there is still political and economic anxiety as the government is caught between the economic systems of the Global North and the economic realities of the Global South. The government and the country must constantly deal with threats of scrutiny from big economic agencies who continuously remind us that we are standing on the edge of junk status. What generally makes developing economies in countries within the Global South even more vulnerable is the devastating impact of global economic and political policies as well as regional and global conflicts and wars.

To attempt to clearly and concisely define the term poverty is challenging for economists and theologians alike. The more we seek to define it, the more we realize that it is not a one-dimensional term but rather is relative, contextual, experiential, and multidimensional. Even the World Bank recognizes that poverty is relative (Decerf 2022, p. 1). Feng and Nguyen (2014) propose that we need to be aware of two types of poverty; firstly, most countries in the world measure their poverty using an *absolute* threshold or in other words, a fixed standard of what households should be able to count on to meet their basic needs. Secondly, however, a few countries have chosen to measure their poverty using a *relative* threshold, that is, a point of cutoff concerning the overall distribution of income or consumption in a country. This limited definition amounts to a person or community's inability to attain a minimal standard of living. To further illustrate that poverty is multi-faceted, Crivelli (2020) indicates that relationships with other people can also be considered good and that poverty is not only defined by a lack of resources but just as much by a lack of genuine relationships. Crivelli (2020, p. 26) then argues: "If business and market interactions become a qualifying moment for civil life, we can hope to break the massive growth, all over the world, of relational poverty in addition to material poverty".

Nevertheless, we need to comprehend that if we limit or restrict the definition of poverty to having money or not in order to buy basic needs, we negate the multifaceted and multidimensional meaning of poverty. Within the South African context, the Bushmen of the Kalahari are a primary example of this reality. For all purposes, based on the one-dimensional definition of poverty, the Kalahari Bushmen are extremely poor, as they do not have money, houses, or other basic material needs that a one-dimensional definition of poverty might perceive as essential for being human. However, within the African traditional, contextual, and experimental environment, the Bushmen are anything but poor or living in poverty. They flourish as human beings within their culture and spiritual environments. This example emphasizes that poverty is understood and defined differently within various communities throughout the globe, as each culture uses multiple and varied terminologies to refer to poverty or poor people. Gweshengwe and Hassan (2020, p. 1) emphasize that we need to uphold the dignity of people by minimizing the misconceptions about poverty in society and understanding and defining poverty in a way that is context-sensitive.

The implication is that poverty would have a very different meaning in the Global North than in the Global South (World Bank 2024). In the Global South, it comes down to where a person will get his or her next meal from. This affirms that poverty is not abstract; it is a fundamental daily reality, people feel it, they see it, they smell it, and they experience it. The community shares a common idea of poor people being designated as needy, without power, and lacking the necessities of life (Magezi 2007, p. 47); therefore, they know who in their community is poor and in real need. It is also in the Global South that the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen, as greater inequality becomes a reality. Buffel (2015, p. 7) affirms this when he states that poverty in South Africa is characterized by the width of the gulf between the rich and the poor, i.e., the degree of inequality; it exists because of a deliberate policy; and material poverty in South Africa was reinforced by racist laws that were an assault on people's humanity. Whereas most pieces of racist legislation have been removed from the statutes, the legacy of those racist policies remains in the hearts and minds of many. In the Global North, poor people normally need to be identified through analysis or a registration system, and they eventually receive financial support from the local or national government. As countries in the Global North are economically in a better position than countries in the Global South, they can provide significant resources to assist the poor and deal with poverty in a more structured way. However, it is also true that there are people who struggle with poverty daily in the Global North, as official residents of countries as well as those who are not official, such as illegal immigrants or unregistered people.

3. Engaging Theologically

As a theologian, it may be wise not to attempt to further ponder on the theory of the discipline of economics but rather to attempt to reflect wisely and responsibly on the theological understanding of poverty. Gutierrez coined liberation theology based on his knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ and his experience living and working with the poor. He struggled to deal with the reality that people died of poverty and realized the essence of interpreting the gospel within the context of the poor. Gutierrez (1992, p. 26) raises two pivotal questions when he reflects on questions of poverty: Why is the experience of the poor relevant in the Church? And why is the experience of the poor important to our understanding of faith? In his reflection on these questions, Gutierrez (1992, p. 26) argues that it is not possible only to have a correct theological opinion on poverty but that it is equally important to have the right behavior, as the Christian existence is about faith in Jesus Christ but also bears witness to his resurrection. The relationship between knowledge of faith and practice is critical for engaging with poverty. This will ensure we do not objectify the poor when reflecting on the poor or poverty. Gutierrez (1992, p. 32) indicated that "it is difficult for some to understand that poverty is not only a social economic issue but a human challenge, a Christian challenge, a global challenge for the Church". It is difficult, as many things will need to change in the Church if we are to take this challenge seriously. Gutierrez (1992, p. 32) explains this: "We must ask how we can be committed to both faith and our witness if we are not taking seriously the inhuman situation, the situation of most of the humanity! The question is how to be coherent, how to say to all the world, especially to the world of the poor: "Your kingdom come"". Waruta (2011, p. 34) affirmed the necessity to recognize the religio-cultural dimension of poverty, but that initiating equitable distribution of resources should not be ignored. The South African practical theologian Bowers Du Toit (2010, p. 432) indicated that during apartheid, theological commentators had different spiritual definitions for salvation based on race and neglected social concerns such as poverty. Bowers Du Toit (2010, p. 432) affirmed that salvation is for everyone: the rich, the poor, and different cultural groups. The Church needs to ensure that it proclaims that salvation needs to be seen as holistic. It is particularly for this reason that Gutierrez (1992, p. 28) refers to Karl Barth, who indicated that God always takes the side of the least ones, according to the Bible. This is why he states, "When we speak of theology as the hermeneutic between faith and witness, faith and communication of faith

(evangelization), taking the side of the poor is to take a way to God" (Gutierrez 1992, p. 28). Gutierrez (1992, p. 32) then explains that this quote indicates that when people have a very sharp sense of God, they will always be sensitive to the poor. The biblical image of God as one who takes the side of the poor is the experience of many believers. What is needed is a way of life, an attitude from the church and its theology that develops from a deep sense of spirituality to ensure the poor walk first. Levinas affirms this in his understanding of ethics, when he indicates that to answer a call of 'here I am' implies an attitude of 'after you' or 'you first' (Saldukaitytė 2019). According to Gutierrez (1992, p. 33), the principal reason the Church and its theology are committed to the poor is because we believe in the God of Jesus Christ. Gutierrez (1992, p. 33) indicated that "For *this* reason, we must be committed to the poor. We are committed not because the poor are good, but because God is good". Bowers Du Toit (2010, p. 435) added that the churches and the believers must bear witness to eschatological values and stand up against inequality and poverty precisely for a better future where we can all live in harmony.

Within the South African context, it was clear during apartheid that black people's human dignity was violated and that continuous material poverty and racist policies deprived people of their human dignity. The Church and its theology needed to be sensitive to the poor as they were vulnerable and exposed. For this to materialize, the Church had to be transformed in terms of its theology and witness to the world. Using the Kenyan Kikuyu proverb '*thina nduri miri*', which means 'poverty does not have roots', Waruta (2011, p. 34) indicates that poverty is not a permanent feature; it can be eradicated. Based on this premise, the question we need to grapple with is as follows: What is inherent in theology and the Church that could contribute meaningfully to dealing with poverty, national well-being, and restoring vulnerability to erase poverty? In this regard, Gutierrez (1992, p. 31) asks whether the Church will announce life and the resurrection, in other words, whether it will be able to be a witness to this definite love in history. Poverty continues to be a big challenge to this announcement. That is why Gutierrez emphasizes that being witness to the resurrection today is our identity as the Church (Gutierrez 1992, p. 32). We as people of the Church should therefore be a testimony of God's love, peace, and justice (Bowers Du Toit 2010, p. 435). It is our responsibility to be the instrument of God's kingdom and to spread God's love and justice. Just as Jesus went out among different rich and poor people to preach the gospel, it is our calling to do the same (Bowers Du Toit 2010, p. 435). The Church's purpose on earth is to bear witness to the gospel and to stand up against poverty, inequality, violence, etc. This reminds us as Christians that we are called to care for the vulnerable of the earth. Considering this preferential option for the poor, the last ones must be the first in the Christian community. It is therefore impossible to practice theology without the experience of the poor. Gutierrez (1992, p. 32) indicates that we need to follow Jesus Christ by accepting the challenge of the poor. For him, there is no alternative; if we do not adhere to this, we can easily experience dissociation between our faith and our witness as Christians. In this sense, Desmond (2023, p. 189) calls on all actors in our society to end poverty, as this is something we need to stand for, march for, and sacrifice for.

As indicated earlier, the Church can play a significant role as a social actor to assist in addressing poverty. There are contentious issues in this regard that need to be identified and addressed. Although the Church is one of the identified subsystems within local civic communities, it is not always evident that it sees and positions itself as a subsystem in the local civic community and actively participates along with other subsystems to address poverty. Churches do have different types of resources that are visible in local communities, such as buildings, a community, housing, human resources, skills, and networks, to name a few. It should also be noted that although the Church can be a significant social actor in addressing poverty, the Church must acknowledge that it does not have a clean track record in terms of dealing with poverty and that the ways it does address poverty could also be forms of abuse or may well create further injustices.

Williams (2022) indicates that within the church and its theology, prosperity theology has mostly negatively impacted developing countries, as it does not appear to be serving

the stated purpose. He acknowledges that although “it cannot be denied that Pentecostalism in itself appeals to African Christians², the realities of Africa’s socio-economic conditions require ideas and practices like those expressed in ubuntu, which can practically and sustainably raise the standard of living of populations” (Williams 2022, p. 6). Although we can in no way equate Pentecostalism to the prosperity gospel, we need to be conscious that an uncritical adoption of prosperity theology in Africa is a threat to sustainable socio-economic development. He argues that for genuine socio-economic development and sustainable prosperity to take place in Africa, “the virtues of honesty, accountability, hard work, integrity, perseverance, community, and delayed gratification, as emphasized by the African traditional values encapsulated in *ubuntu*, along with a more Christ-centered Christian theology that insists on social change, need to be taken seriously (Williams 2022, p. 6)”. In response to the indication of Williams to make use of *ubuntu* we are reminded by Magezi (2008, p. 271) not to uphold the often reified African ideal of *ubuntu* within the contexts of poverty and wellness. Waruta (2011) argues that although poverty is often blamed on external causes, e.g., colonialism, slavery, and exploitation, there is a need to look at internal causes, some of which are based on cultural belief systems. For instance, one could propose a discourse on the place of cultural belief systems in the issue of Human Rights and poverty. Again, given that poverty is an ideological issue, it should therefore be tackled as such. In conclusion, Waruta (2011) noted that the logic of witchcraft also keeps Africa behind and that by blaming misfortune on others, we interfere with politics and development.

Notwithstanding the disputes and squabbles that often occur in churches, it is indisputable that Church people in Africa still experience cohesion (Magezi 2008, p. 264). This social capital is the glue that could be harnessed, cultivated, and channeled to build responsible citizens with respect for the country’s cherished ideals, leading to significant well-being. Because Church leaders are actors in communities, they can positively influence people and communities by modeling the ideal ethical life consistent with national expectations, and being well-respected, they can mobilize resources (Magezi 2008, p. 264) that can address poverty and vulnerability. In this regard, any theology that wishes to address issues of poverty, vulnerability, and vulnerability must address power discourses as well as radicalize understanding of who our neighbor, the poor, is.

Gutierrez (1992, p. 28) emphasizes the importance of scripture for taking the side of the poor and following a route to God. To illustrate the importance of scripture with this goal in mind, it is helpful to engage with some biblical texts. Several Hebrew words in the Old Testament describe poverty³. The Hebrew words indicated in the Bible for poverty have different meanings related to poverty. The different strands within the Old Testament, namely the Exodus, legal, prophetic, wisdom, and liturgical traditions, also have different meanings and focal points. Therefore, it is difficult to indicate a specific definition of poverty based on the meaning of the different Hebrew words. What we gather from these texts is that poverty was of grave significance to the community of which those people were part, according to the Old Testament. To indicate this in more depth: The Exodus, legal, wisdom, and prophetic traditions present harsh situations associated with poverty, like hunger and thirst, homelessness, economic exploitation, legal injustices, and lack of sufficient farmland (Limburg 1988, p. 92). The *Book of Amos* is one example in the Old Testament that illustrates the harshness of poverty. According to McComiskey (1992, p. 375), Amos attacks injustice against the poor and the most defenseless people. Amos uses vivid and brutal imagery to convey social and economic evils (McComiskey 1992, p. 375). Amos 2:7 describes God’s anger with the people who have dishonored His holy name by the way they have legally and socially oppressed the poor whilst experiencing a thriving religious life (König 1974, p. 36). More concretely, God’s anger is aroused because the poor are unfairly treated, in Chapter 5 Verses 11–24. To God, this is an injustice, and He will punish them. Then, in Amos 6:1–7, it becomes clear that God is addressing the privileged people who have everything at their disposal but continue with the injustices. During this time, the economy was good, people flourished, and there was peace. However, the rich people

despised God and mistreated the poor. Limburg (1988, p. 112) refers to this attitude as a denouncement of individual affluence coupled with social indifference. Therefore, God calls Amos to change their ways. His judgment is clear when he indicates to them that the time to be privileged has passed. Amos signifies that the Sovereign God insisted that the people of God need to treat each other in a fair and just way.

Corresponding to the Old Testament understanding, the Greek words used to indicate poverty (πτωχός-: poor, destitute, spiritually poor, either in a good sense (humble devout persons) or bad (Strong's Greek Search 2024)) need to be understood within the New Testament context. The New Testament addresses poverty in various ways, with a strong emphasis on the importance of caring for the poor and marginalized. We read this in well-known passages on poverty such as the Sermon on the Mount, especially the Beatitudes, and Matt 25 (France 1985, pp. 102–52, 349–58). More specifically, the reference to dealing with poverty in James 2:15–16 refers to material poverty and the specific task of Christians to provide for those in need (Davids 1982, pp. 120–23). It also refers to generosity and compassion towards the poor, as indicated in Luke 10:33–35 (the parable of the good Samaritan) (Marshall 1978, pp. 444–50). It addresses structural injustices as the causes of poverty, such as unjust economic systems and corrupt leaders (Luke 4:18–19) (Marshall 1978, pp. 182–84). Overall, the New Testament emphasizes the importance of caring for those in need, both materially and spiritually. It encourages generosity, compassion, and a commitment to justice for the poor and marginalized. Van Riessen (2018) reminds us that compassion should not be understood exclusively as a form of empathy or *Einfühlung*, or coming near to the other through understanding. This should be understood as the ability of Christians and the Church and its theology to engage justly with the poor.

4. Pastoral Theological Reflection

Gutierrez (1992, p. 28) indicates that if “poverty is to be a global challenge to the Church, then that challenge is made not only to its spirituality, but also to its pastoral work, and theology”. Over time, churches developed an institutional pastoral theology that manifested in the form of a pastoral theology from above. Viewing the poor and vulnerable from a position of power directly influenced the type of pastoral theological approach and practice that developed. This kind of pastoral theological approach views the poor and vulnerable as objects as it prescribes what they need and what is important to them based on limited understanding. It is as if the Church has lost contact with the real needs of the poor and the vulnerable. It is as if the Church has developed a pastoral theology of comfort and seeks ways to bring the poor to a place of comfort. In this regard, the Church has lost its ability to develop a theology within the discomfort where people find themselves. This is why the poor and the most vulnerable desperately needed a voice and this is probably one of the reasons for the development of Liberation Theology and Black Theology (Beukes 2014, p. 91). These theologies are seen as theologies from below (Bowers Du Toit 2009, p. 2), developed by and with the poor. Because of that, they have the legitimacy to make everyone aware of the injustices of poverty. It is obvious why statistics fall short of painting the full picture of the poor and the most vulnerable. Leimgruber (2022, p. 4) states that it is critical to look with sensitivity at the subject of pastoral care from the perspective of those affected, as the Church can easily look at the poor and the most vulnerable from a perspective of power. Therefore, it is crucial to listen to the stories of the vulnerable and suffering poor, often women and children, often from rural areas, to obtain a glimpse of the complex faces of poverty.

The devastating reality is that the Church and its theology have damaged relations of mutual trust with the poor and the most vulnerable to the extent that injustice continues to thrive. It is required that the Church and its theology reflect deeply on its pastoral theological content and mission to the poor and the vulnerable. This attitude can start a process to restore trust and create opportunities for justice to be done and for hope to become life-giving. This is where a pastoral care approach such as the Dialogical Intergenerational Pastoral Process (DIPP) can assist the Church and its pastoral theology in trans-

forming its content and mission to the poor and vulnerable. The essential foundations of this approach are relational ethics, dialogue, responsibility, accountability, and justice. It is ethical, as pastoral care is always concerned with the poor and most vulnerable. [Van Rhijn and Meulink-Korf \(2019, p. 264\)](#) remind us that care is framed by a passionate concern for the vulnerability of the other, in other words, for the poor and the most vulnerable.

The DIPP focuses not only on what is ethical for the current generation but also on future generations. [Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner \(1986, p. viii–x\)](#) conducted fundamental research on the intergenerational transference of trauma. The authors referred to this as transgenerational solidarity as it demonstrated an ethical concern for future generations. [Van Rhijn and Meulink-Korf \(2019, p. 63\)](#) indicated that “Nagy wanted to underline the fact that the most crucial generational consequences do not even constitute feed-back. Even if they are part of circular transactions, they essentially feed forward”.

The DIPP approach assists the church in encountering vulnerable and poor people who have lost their trust to find new avenues for justice. [Van Doorn \(2020, p. 40\)](#) reminds the Church that the process of encountering the poor and most vulnerable needs to embed the attitude of patience if it wants to detect and explore sources of new confidence. [Van Rhijn and Meulink-Korf \(2019, p. 269\)](#) firmly state that the encounter and engagement are about merciful vulnerability and promoting humane humanity. This implies that the identity and vocation of the Church and its pastoral theology will need to be expressed through merciful compassion in caregiving and ethical and just relationships with the most vulnerable, i.e., the poor.

For this to happen, the Church will need to acknowledge its vulnerability when it comes to how it has dealt with the poor and the most vulnerable. [Van Doorn \(2020, p. 21\)](#) reminds the Church that “The challenge in the process of dialoguing is not to start objectifying oneself. This challenge is also applicable in processes of connecting to the other, namely, not to objectify the other and to establish the subjectivity {XE “subjectivity”} of the other”. This pastoral approach is not only about addressing poverty and assisting the most vulnerable from a pastoral theological point of view, but it is fundamentally about being in a relationship with the poor and the vulnerable in such a way that in the meeting with the poor and most vulnerable, a dialogue arises which allows the poor and the vulnerable to talk back. [Van Doorn \(2020, p. 12\)](#) indicates that true encountering touches the very fiber of human existence and therefore, the Church and its pastoral theology need to be open to be taught and transformed by the poor and the most vulnerable. [Van Rhijn and Meulink-Korf \(2019, p. 91\)](#) call this openness courageous vulnerability. This occurs when the Church understands that because weakness is posed by the vulnerability of the poor and vulnerable, it reveals a deeper sense of care for the poor and most vulnerable. In this regard, [Van Rhijn and Meulink-Korf \(2019, p. 258\)](#) explain that vulnerability is, therefore, in the first place, not a pre-psychological category but is about a substitutive vulnerability that forms the basis of care and comfort.

It is imperative to acknowledge that the poor and the vulnerable are not only outside the Church but are indeed a reality within the Church and therefore, the Church cannot just turn a blind eye to this pandemic. To address this fundamentally requires vocation, social action, compassion, justice, and passion for the poor and the most vulnerable. This is only possible if the Church can develop a relationship with the poor and be vulnerable and open in its dialogue with the poor. Where this manifests, it creates opportunities for the Church to change the poor but more importantly, it creates opportunities for the poor to change the Church and its pastoral theology. [Myers \(2011, p. 177\)](#) emphasizes that this is hard work for both sides of the spectrum as it is a prophetic act. The new evangelization is an invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in the lives of the poor and to put them at the center of the Church’s pilgrim way. Christians are called to find Christ in the poor and to lend our voice to their causes but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak with them, and to embrace the mysterious wisdom God wishes to share with us through them. When pastoral theology and the Church embrace this attitude, it leads to real encounters with each other. If these encounters are based on dignity, equality,

respect, compassion, dialogue, and trust and are relational and ethical in their being, then it paves the way for both sides, and in particular, the poor to change the Church and its pastoral theology.

Many local churches tend to channel their responsibility to address poverty and vulnerability to NGOs (non-governmental organizations) and FBOs (faith-based organizations). This is very convenient in many ways, as they are well connected and receive funding from local and international organizations to attend to this reality. Without any doubt, NGOs and FBOs are very effective in addressing poverty. These churches have opted to support the NGOs and FBO with money rather than to get involved directly. However, they also need the Church to be an active participant, to ensure they can persist with this task. It is impossible for organizations to even attempt to solve poverty on their own. What is needed is a joined effort. It is the Church's and its members' responsibility to lighten the burden of the poor and to stand against injustices and poverty. It needs to be an advocate for people who cannot fight for themselves. Pope Francis (2018, p. 1) reminds us: "Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society". In this way, the Church can be hopeful in a hopeless situation by ensuring that God's love is meant for everyone, and it can live out eschatological values together with the community (Beukes 2014, p. 219). Meulink-Korf and van Rhijn (2016, p. 27) rightly indicate that contextual ministry, in other words, the DIPP, wants to help people *so that they can keep going or recover amidst their vulnerability*.

5. Conclusions

The Church and pastoral theology are responsible with the poor and the vulnerable by addressing poverty. The gap between rich and poor people has exceeded all expectations. Based on the theory of the DIPP, the next generation will hold the current generation accountable for how we have dealt with poverty and the vulnerable. If the Church and pastoral theology are serious about the suggestion that all humans must live life in abundance, then, there should be no limits to abundant love, abundant justice, and abundant peace (Myers 2011, p. 176). The identity and vocation of the Church will need to be expressed through a relationship with God and with the most vulnerable, the poor. The Church and pastoral theology need to realize that we are the carriers of God's redemptive and restorative work in the world, and they therefore need to continue to seek truth and justice. This is the essence of the Church, as Pope Francis (2018, p. 1) indicates that Benedict XVI taught the Church that it "is implicit in our Christian faith in a God who became poor for us, to enrich us with his poverty". This implies that the Church cannot only be a Church for the poor and the vulnerable, but also a Church with the poor and vulnerable. They cannot be objectified, and neither are they the receivers of the Church's merciful and diaconal activities. This contribution argues that if the poor and the vulnerable are not seen as co-partners in a reciprocal relationship in addressing poverty, poverty will not be eradicated. Theologies that re-assert God's solidarity with the poor, oppressed, powerless, vulnerable, and marginalized can assist us in breaking the destructive chains of poverty. This process requires the Church and its theology to consciously focus on social justice in its quest to deal with poverty and vulnerability.

In this contribution, I have proposed that the Church needs a pastoral theology to address the challenge of poverty and vulnerability in the form of the Dialogical Intergenerational Pastoral Process. Based on the content of this approach, the Church and its pastoral theology will need to enter into dialogue with the poor and the vulnerable to ensure that the poor and vulnerable can change pastoral theology and the Church. They also need to ensure that they engage in dialogue with other academic disciplines to ensure that the Church and its theology do not attempt to address the complexity of poverty on their own.

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Notes

- ¹ Church in this contribution does not refer to any particular denomination as such but to the broader Christian Church.
- ² For a more in-depth understanding of this phenomenon see the work of [Frahm-Arp \(2018, pp. 1–16\)](#).
- ³ דל-lean (Strong's Hebrew Dictionary 2024), דל-Dal/lean (Strong's Hebrew Dictionary 2024), עיני-poor/ebyon (Strong's Hebrew Dictionary 2024), עני-poor/misken (adjective) (Strong's Hebrew Dictionary 2024).

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